The Fourth Church Pulpit

FOR THE RARELY RELIGIOUS

(but occasionally tearful)

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Easter Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9, John 20:1-18

" . . . he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, . . ."
Isaiah 25:8 (NRSV)

Isn't that a wonderful sermon title? There are preachers for whom the ability to create sermon titles is a pure and wonderful gift. The titles are clever, literate, brilliant. And there are preachers for whom coming up with a title is more difficult than preparing the sermon itself. I am one of the latter. In fact, my vulnerability at this critical point has gotten me in trouble on occasion. In my former church, the custom was to place the title of Sunday's sermon on the large bulletin board which in this case sat on the main east-west artery through the middle of the city. Every week I would fill in a form and give it to the secretary who prepared the Sunday bulletin: hymns, scripture, prayers and sermon. She would then type the sermon topic on a piece of paper and give it to the custodian who put it on the bulletin board in big white letters. I was having more than my usual problem with the title. I knew what the topic was; the sermon was written. I simply couldn't come up with a catchy descriptive phrase. So, in the space in the form for sermon title I wrote, "I'll give it to you later!" You can guess what happened. I got in my car and made a few calls, drove back to the church and there on the street, at rush hour — Sermon: "I'll Give It To You Later."

So I am particularly pleased when I come up with a good one, even when I have shamelessly lifted it, as I often do, from someone else. This one comes from an article in the *New York Times* last week that caught my eye. It was by Peter Steinfels: "With Passover and Easter near, the case for the rarely religious." I've got it, I thought — my Easter title . . . "For the Rarely Religious." [*New York Times*, 4/3/93]

What an evocative theme for Easter! The title comes from Mr. Steinfels but as I worked with the text, one of the loveliest stories in the Bible, from the 20th chapter of John's Gospel, the title seemed more and more to fit the wonderful and illusive character in the story: Mary — Mary Magdalene. She was one of the "rarely religious" but she requires a parentheses at least: thus "the occasionally tearful" because that is what she is doing in the story, standing at the empty tomb of Jesus, weeping.

Mr. Steinfel's "rarely religious" refers, of course, to all the people who show up at church at Easter but rarely during the rest of the year. Twenty percent more, to be precise, he reports. I don't know where he got his figures. Here at Fourth Church, it is almost a hundred percent. "Sometimes pastors welcome this phenomenon," Mr. Steinfels wrote, "but not without muttering, 'what about the rest of the year?' And sometimes they more than mutter. They scold." . . . As in the story of the preacher who began his Easter sermon by wishing the congregation a very Merry Christmas because he knew he wouldn't see many of them until next Easter.

Not this preacher. If I only went to church once a year, this would be the day, and why not? The flowers are gorgeous, the music sensational. It's religion with its banners unfurled. It is the perfect day for the rarely religious who, I am proposing, however, along with all the rest of us, find themselves occasionally tearful. And that is exactly the person who shows up in the very early morning hours of the first day of the week, at a tomb in the Jerusalem garden of Joseph of Arimathea.

We don't know much about her actually. Her name indicates she is from Magdala, a port city on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee. Magdala was a wide-open city with a flourishing prostitution trade. And so some scholars, and many popularizers like Nikos Kazantzakis in *The Last Temptation of Christ* have portrayed Mary as a prostitute. There is absolutely no evidence for that. It has also been suggested that she is the unnamed woman, the sinner, who interrupts the dignified banquet at a Pharisees' house one time and pours costly ointment over his feet, wiping and drying his feet with her hair, a scene of enormous power. Again, there is no evidence.

What we do know about her is that she was from Magdala, and that Jesus had cured her, freed her from what the culture at the time called "demon possession," which could have been anything from serious psychosis to irregular, bizarre and defiantly anti- social behavior like prostitution. What we know about Mary is that her behavior was such that it was said she had seven demons, or evil spirits, and therefore, her attachment to Jesus and her conspicuous presence in the community of his followers was remarkable.

I conclude that whatever was wrong with her, her demeanor and behavior isolated her from the respectable community. She was a reject, an outsider, a non-person. And I conclude that whatever was wrong, it was confronted and healed by the steady grace, the non-judging, accepting love of this man who had a way of cutting through all the social customs and taboos, and the accumulated religious morality, all the traditional behavioral norms; cutting through all that to the soul, the center of being and by the sheer miracle of his unconditional love, bringing healing, meaning, wholeness, loveliness to a lot of people: that woman who washed his feet, for instance; Nicodemus, the respected businessman; the woman at the well with all her marital difficulties; the man lying by the pool for thirty-eight years; and Mary who, whatever was the matter, must have been particularly unlovely, until she met him and was touched by his love and was reborn and became lovely.

And so I conclude that they were very good friends and that she loved him. And I conclude that is why she follows him through those terrible and holy days to his trial, and his public humiliation, and his ghastly parade through the streets carrying his cross, the thorns pressed into his forehead. And when everybody else is long gone out of sheer terror, she and a few other women are still there as nails are driven through his hands and feet and the cross is raised and his full weight hangs there, slowly dying. This is a woman of courage which is always the product of deeply passionate love.

And so it is not surprising that she is the first to go to the tomb, after the Sabbath before the sun is up, in the gray half-light of the pre-dawn. Nor is it surprising that she is weeping.

She is weeping in grief, of course; the tears that come when someone you love dies: your parents, your spouse, your beloved, your friend; the tears that won't come at first and then unexpectedly flow like a flood gate suddenly opened; tears that come years afterward with a fleeting memory of an experience shared, a smile, a touch, a song, Christmas, Easter. When his beloved mother died Henri Nouwen wrote,

> "Real grief is not healed by time. It is false to think that the passing of time will slowly make us forget her and take away our pain. If time does anything, it deepens our grief." [*A Letter of Consolation,* p. 16]

She is weeping in grief for her dear friend. And she is of course weeping because his death, particularly the manner in which it happened, the cruelty, the public humiliation, seemed to be the definitive crushing of the high ideals, the lovely and gracious ideas he stood for. How do you make sense now of love instead of hatred, forgiveness, giving instead of receiving in light of what happened? What on earth sense is there in the blessedness of the meek, the peacemakers, in light of what happened on Friday? So she weeps for the weakness and vulnerability of love.

Let her weeping stand for all the women and men who weep: for the mothers of Bosnia and Palestine, Israel and Northern Ireland, of Somalia and Sudan, and the fathers who weep in frustrated rage at their impotence to provide for and protect their wives and children. Let her weeping stand for the weeping of the mothers of Cabrini Green who watch their children's eyes widen in fear when the shooting starts, whose children die and are forgotten.

Let Mary's weeping stand for anyone who has ever wept over the human condition. In Will Campbell's wonderful memoir, *Brother to a Dragonfly,* he recalls a day in his early life when an African-American neighbor in Mississippi was murdered. He remembers hearing in the distance the sounds of weeping and wailing as the man's mother and her friends came, almost in procession . . . how the woman's friends almost carried her and their voices: "Lord Jesus, oh Jesus, bring my baby home." Years later Campbell wrote,

> "Whether West-African or European, Nigerian or Mississippian in origin, they were the pleadings of an African peasant woman to the son of a Jewish peasant woman to be with her in her travail. They were Jesus' sounds. And they were sounds that would not soon depart from us." [p. 59-62]

Let Mary Magdalene weeping in the garden stand for all the men and women, including you and me on occasion, weeping for grief, for lost dreams, for disappointment and resignation and rage. Let her weeping be for the human condition, which is what much of the weeping in the Bible is about. In the prophet's vision, the day of the Lord is when "death will be swallowed up and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces . . . ." [Isaiah 25:7] — all the way to the last page of the Bible, in the glorious Revelation of John in which "death will be no more, and God will wipe away every tear." [Revelation 21:4]

Who doesn't know about that weeping, that quiet resignation to the presence and power of death.

Distinguished Catholic theologian, the late Karl Rahner said,

> "Death is the absurd arch-contradiction of existence." [Nouwen, *op.cit.*, p. 70]

And Nouwen, reflecting on his mother's dying:

> "Although I think it is possible to speak about the meaning of death, I also think that death is the one event against which we protest with all our being." [*op. cit.*, p. 70]

And my favorite, Edna St. Vincent Millay on death:

> "I do not approve."

Sometime between the age of 35 and 45 we have a head-on collision with our own mortality someone noted. The huge fact of human death comes into focus and we are never again free of it.

The delightfully witty and wise Southern Baptist, the late Carlyle Marney, used to advise ministers that it is futile to discuss the resurrection with young people because they don't know about death yet, have never failed, don't know about impotence, vulnerability, weakness; don't even know much about heartburn. [William Willimon, *On A Wild and Windy Mountain,* p. 90]

So let Mary stand for anyone who knows about mortality and has wept, literally, or quietly, privately in the dark night of the soul for the human condition.

In fact, let Good Friday stand for the naked, unadorned reality of human life. Let what happened to Mary's gentle friend stand for all the things that happen and shouldn't . . . for little children, innocent adolescents gunned down by gang members bearing semi-automatic weapons and their profiteers and proponents . . . which already hold our whole culture hostage . . . for resurgent racism and intolerance. . . . Let Good Friday stand for every injustice and terrorism and cruelty.

My friend, Gerry Wise, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, which sits on a very different corner from this one, at Kimbark & 64th, in Woodlawn, wrote to his congregation last week:

> "We always seem to live somewhere between Good Friday and Easter. Every Sunday is Easter. However, when we have the police corner a car full of armed teenagers across the street, when another group of teenagers holds up the whole gymnasium and take everyone's athletic jacket . . . it is then that we realize that without taking seriously all the Good Fridays there can't be an Easter."

After one weekend in which there were eighteen shootings in the neighborhood, Gerry proposed a summit conference on disarmament, not in Moscow or Washington, but in Chicago.

Mary was weeping because of the finality, the reality of Good Friday. And that, I have come to believe, is why we all are here, the regularly and the rarely religious. It is no longer because of fashion. There are, at this moment, many more fashionable places to be, not very far from here. It is, I am convinced, because we are, all of us, we who care about our neighbors, who love our own lives and the life of our city, who are grateful to be alive but wonder how to be grateful when little babies die of hunger . . . all of us, I conclude, are at least occasionally tearful and our tears are sometimes grief at our personal losses and sometimes anger at injustice in the world and the seeming hopelessness and weakness of the good, the noble, the honest; but they are real enough to bring us here on this day to see if there is another word.

Which is to say, we have not come here to listen to a scholarly lecture on the logical plausibility of resurrection. It's not what Mary wanted . . . scientifically reliable evidence that a dead body breathed and got up and walked away. The Easter texts themselves make that effort futile. They are extraordinarily complex. There are six different accounts and they agree on almost nothing except the tomb was empty and that the people on the scene did not immediately conclude that he has risen. In fact, quite the contrary. Mary, through her tears, looks right at him and doesn't recognize him.

Until he says her name. Mary puts this whole matter on a personal, not a theological or worse yet, biological level. Weeping in the garden, her hope crushed, her dearest friend dead, she does not need knowledge or scientific evidence, she needs the power and courage and stamina to go on living. She needs the sense that the freedom and joy she experienced in his love was not going to cease now. She needs hope for the future.

"Mary," he says. Her name is what he says. The resurrection of Jesus Christ comes at us at a place we keep hidden, covered over with the trappings of our busy, successful life, hidden behind walls of self-sufficiency and accomplishment and progress and our bank accounts and career paths — a place called our spirit, our soul, where we do weep on occasion and where we need love and forgiveness and strength; where we need to know that our dearest relationships are not wasted and gone — when death intrudes; where we need to know some reason to go on hoping and working and struggling for a better world — against the powerful inertia of life itself; where we need to know that our personal demons are worth fighting and that they may be overcome; where more than anything in the world we need to hear someone say our name; that we matter, that we will not be forgotten by God.

Distinguished American novelist Reynolds Price wrote recently that the one sentence we human beings crave more than any other is this:

> "The maker of all things loves and wants me." [*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, p. 72]

That is what Mary heard and that is the good and mysterious and quiet word to each of us this day . . . our name — spoken by one who was dead but is alive forever more; one who walked through the valley of the shadow of death and whose presence in the world is the promise that love is stronger than death, that good ultimately wins over evil; that ideas like justice and peace and compassion, which occasionally seem so weak in the face of reality, ultimately will be victorious, and that God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying will be no more.

So let the laughing begin, the hymns and the trumpets and the flowers . . . and the poetry which stretches for words to contain the joy.

> "The silence breaks into morning.
> That One Star lights the world.
> The lily springs to life and not even Solomon . . .
> Let it begin with singing and never end!
> Oh, angels, quit your lamenting!
> Oh, pilgrims, upon your knees in tearful prayer,
> Rise up and take your hearts and run!
> We who were no people are named anew
> God's people,
> For he who was no more is forevermore."
> [*Kneeling in Jerusalem*, "And The Glory," Ann Weems, p. 94]

Christ is Risen.

He is risen indeed.